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HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM 2 November 1973
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SUBJECT: SNIE 11/30-73: SOVIET MILITARY OPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PRÉCIS

The growing Soviet commitment to the Arab cause is based on both the USSR's regional interests and a broader concern to demonstrate the global nature of Soviet power. It hopes for an outcome that not only enhances its regional position, but allows détente to go forward.

These motives have led to a substantial Soviet military involvement. The salient moves include a heavy augmentation of the USSR's Mediterranean naval force and the confirmed shipment of SCUDs to Egypt. []

It has mounted a large resupply operation, the most worrisome aspect of which is that it may include equipment available for possible later use by Soviet units. []

Should the cease-fire break down -- or threaten to do so -- Soviet military options would carry varying degrees of risk.

- The USSR could *deploy naval units* in a more threatening manner.
- It could *send combat air units to the Middle East*. This kind of intervention would have a strong political impact but would not have a decisive early effect on the ground fighting.

* This Estimate has been reviewed by the USIB Agencies at the working level. It has not been reviewed by the USIB itself.

-- It could deploy airborne forces. This would have even sharper deterrent effect. In actual fighting these units could be used to screen Cairo or Damascus, but could not stand up to a determined Israel offensive in the desert.

-- It could bring a nuclear dimension into play, either by overt or private threats. SCUDs with high-explosive warheads might be fired to give weight to these warnings. [

Actual
Soviet use of nuclear weapons is extremely unlikely.

-- It could introduce, over a longer time period, ground combat units. These might be sent to Syria, where their appearance or use would reduce Israeli military pressures in the Egyptian sector.

If the present stalemate continues unchanged for several weeks, there is a danger that the Soviets will introduce more forces.

DISCUSSION

I. SOVIET POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

1. In our judgment, Soviet conduct prior to the Middle East war was mainly reactive to events and they had little or no control over the Arabs' decision to go to war. They have sought advantages for themselves from the war, however, and have shown clearly that they are not ready to let their interest in detente totally override their objectives in the Middle East. Furthermore, the Kremlin's behavior in the latest Middle East crisis suggests that its motivation is no longer merely an effort to maintain its influence and physical presence there, important though that remains. Rather, the Soviet leadership probably sees the crisis as a key test of the credibility of its world-wide image of a superpower equal to that of the US.

2. In the present circumstances, the Soviets probably see their interests best served by preservation of the cease-fire and progress on the political front. But the Soviets recognize the fragility of the cease-fire and the likelihood that, if it breaks down, the ensuing hostilities could again quickly turn against the Arabs. This places them under pressure to consider military options designed to avert a breakdown and to be in a position to act effectively if fighting does resume.

II. SOVIET MILITARY CAPABILITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

3. The Soviets have assembled in the Mediterranean and have available in the USSR a strong and mobile force that could be brought directly to bear in the Middle East should they decide to do so.

Naval

4. The Soviet naval force in the Mediterranean has almost doubled to around 90 units and now includes over 40 surface warships and over 20 submarines. These ships have both surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles. The force also includes 9 amphibious ships, some of which are known to have naval infantry troops on board. The Soviets also have one or two naval infantry regiments -- up to 4,000 men -- in the Black Sea Fleet.

5. This force is capable of performing a number of roles:

- interposition against potential US intervention.
- intelligence collection.
- landing of naval infantry.

Military Advisors

6. Immediately before the outbreak of hostilities there were some 300-500 Soviet advisors and technicians in Egypt. These advisors were located

with various air and air defense units, ground forces and various armed force academies. During this same period there were some 1,500 Soviet advisors and technicians in Syria -- attached to the same types of units. Reports indicate additional advisors -- probably numbering in the hundreds -- have arrived in both countries since the war began. Some Soviet advisors participated -- at least indirectly -- in the hostilities.

Logistics

7. The Soviets have mounted a substantial air- and sealift -- more than 1,000 planes and over 30 cargo ships carrying arms -- since the war began. Nevertheless, this falls short of their full capabilities.

Air Forces

8. Aside from transport aircraft, there is no evidence that Soviet Air Force units have been employed in the Middle East fighting.

9. If Soviet fighter units are sent to Egypt and Syria, the aircraft probably would be disassembled and transported aboard cargo aircraft or ships. A Mig-21 regiment of 40 fighters would require some 55 AN-12 flights. It would take about a week to get the aircraft to the Middle East and ready for combat.

Airborne Forces

10. Soviet airborne forces -- which apparently were in an advanced alert status during the fighting -- probably are now in a precautionary alert. Movement of one of the seven Soviet airborne divisions to the Middle East would require a sizeable airlift -- at least 350 AN-12 flights. If their equipment has been sent by sea, however, the number of flights could be reduced substantially.

SCUD Missile Force

11. SCUD ballistic missile equipment [] in Egypt []
] although the system may have been deployed before the war.
We do not know how many SCUDs have been delivered to Egypt, nor do we know whether the missiles are to be manned by Egyptian or Soviet crews.

Nuclear Weapons

12. []

]

Ground Forces

13. There have been unconfirmed reports of Soviet armored forces appearing in Syria. [

14. The pattern of activity suggests either the Soviets have stripped some of their armored units to provide rapid resupply to the Arabs, or actual Soviet units are being shipped to the Middle East. We cannot say which of these is correct. A total of 8 amphibious ships are estimated to have called at Latakia, Syria since the outbreak of hostilities, while some 30 other arms carriers are believed to have put into eastern Mediterranean ports during the same time period. The possibility exists, therefore, that portions of Soviet armored units have already disembarked in Egypt or Syria, but we have no firm indication of this.]

III. SOME MILITARY OPTIONS OPEN TO MOSCOW

15. Moscow is probably giving first consideration to those measures that could be carried out prior to a breakdown in the cease-fire. The Soviets would hope not only to be better prepared for large-scale intervention, should it come to that, but also to have impressed the US and

Israel with the seriousness they attach to any failure to move ahead with the cease-fire/withdrawal process. There are already signs that the Soviets are exercising this option -- the buildup of the Mediterranean Squadron, the addition of more amphibious ships and naval infantry to it, the appearance of more Soviet military personnel in both Syria and Egypt and the possible pre-positioning of military equipment. At the same time, we believe that the Soviets have not discounted US military capabilities or its willingness to employ them, and that a concern to limit the damage to détente still affects their calculations.

16. One Soviet option would be to introduce combat air support and air defense units. Such actions would demonstrate a serious commitment of Soviet support if the cease-fire were threatened and would bolster the Arabs should a resumption of the war involve deep penetration air operations by the Israelis. Tactical air units by themselves would have marginal military impact if the Arab military position on the ground were deteriorating rapidly.

17. If the Soviets decide to introduce troops during the cease-fire, Soviet airborne divisions probably would be the most readily available. The political effect of this move would be far stronger than in the case of air defense units and would significantly raise the risk in Soviet eyes of confrontation with the US. If the cease-fire breaks down, the

airborne units would have only marginal military capabilities against Israel armor in the desert but they would be more effective in defending Cairo or Damascus.

18. If the Soviets have placed nuclear weapons in the Middle East, these could provide backing for their ground forces. It is, however, difficult to conceive of circumstances in which the Soviets would choose to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. It is certain, in our view, that they would not put such weapons in the hands of Arab forces.

19. [

] The

deployment could also be intended to rescue the Arabs from a future military collapse. They could employ a range of actions -- hints, private warnings, SCUD firings with high-explosive warheads, a public statement -- to bring a nuclear threat into political play.

20. Within two to three weeks of taking a decision, the Soviets could introduce their first tank or motorized divisions. Such a step would add to Arab strength along the cease-fire lines and increase the threat of an Arab resumption of hostilities if negotiations on political questions did not progress favorably.